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THE MANNER OF CHRIST'S EUCHARISTIC PRESENCE ACCORDING TO MARTIN LUTHER

Egil Grislis

In regard to the exact manner of the eucharistic presence of Christ the young Martin Luther was at first somewhat uncertain and hence rather broadminded.¹ His starting point is the doctrine of transubstantiation which he affirms on several occasions.² Yet at times the affirmation appears to be only formal, since it seems that Luther is already beginning to look beyond transubstantiation.³ Luther writes:

For just as the bread is changed into his true natural body and the wine into his natural true blood, so truly are we also drawn and changed into the spiritual body, that is, into the fellowship of Christ and all saints . . . (L.W.,35:59).

In the same tract Luther underscores that the "true significance" of the eucharist is — "real fellowship": "In this way we are changed into one another and are made into a community by love" (L.W.,35:58). Thus without explicitly denying transubstantiation, Luther views the mystical union with Christ and all Christians, through the transforming, regenerative change of the believer as the focal point of this sacrament. A year later, in 1520, Luther is far more explicit. In the famous reformation tract *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, transubstantiation is prominently listed under the rubric of captivity. Yet the critique is restrained: "*The second captivity of this sacrament* is less grievous as far as the conscience is concerned, yet the gravest of dangers threatens the man who would attack it, to say nothing of con-

1. With specific attention to eucharistic presence, numerous important issues have not been discussed in this study, e.g., concomitance, manducatio impiorum, ex opere operato, real presence in use and apart from use, etc.

2. Albrecht Peters, *Realpraesenz: Luthers Zeugnis von Christi Gegenwart im Abendmahl* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1960), pp. 10-41 reviews the major interpretations of Luther's eucharistic theology.

3. Cf. Frido Mann, *Das Abendmahl beim jungen Luther* (Muenchen: Max Hueber, 1971), pp. 73-74.

demning it" (L.W., 36:28). Then Luther immediately explains why he now prefers another interpretation:

Some time ago, when I was drinking in scholastic theology, the learned Cardinal of Cambrai [Pierre d'Ailly, 1350-1420] gave me food for thought . . . He argues with great acumen that to hold that real bread and real wine, and not merely their accidents, are present on the altar, would be much more probable and require fewer superfluous miracles — if only the church had not decreed otherwise (L.W., 36:29).

William of Ockham had been the first most prominent discoverer of this perspective. Luther was also very well acquainted with the writings of Gabriel Biel who developed a similar position. Luther's invoking of the name of d'Ailly may be explained as a way of making his own position more persuasive, since the cardinal had not been censured by the church.⁴ As Luther continues his statement, he turns his attention to the eucharistic presence of Christ and explains:

. . . after floating in a sea of doubt, I at last found rest for my conscience in the above view, namely, that it is real bread and real wine, in which Christ's real flesh and real blood are present in no other way and to no less a degree than the others assert them to be under their accidents (L.W., 36:28-29).

Luther's preference for such an interpretation, known as consubstantiation, has a clear theological rationale. Namely, Luther has been moved by the Ockhamist argument that St. Thomas Aquinas' separation between substance and accidents (untenable from the point of classical Aristotelian philosophy and possible only through a divine miracle) is an unnecessary embellishment. The substance of Christ, argues Luther, can co-exist with the substances of bread and wine. He illustrates:

In red-hot iron, for instance, the two substances, fire and iron, are so mingled that every part is both iron and fire.⁵

Having stated this preference, Luther now hastens to report that transubstantiation is "a monstrous word and a monstrous idea" (L.W., 36:31). While these are indeed harsh words, from the context of the entire statement it does not appear that Luther wanted to do away with the category of "substance" as a way for describing the exact mode of Christ's eucharistic presence.⁶ As a matter of fact, Luther continues to think of eucharistic presence in terms of "substance" in later life as well.⁷ Indeed,

4. Erwin Iserloh, *Gnade und Eucharistie in der philosophischen Theologie des Wilhelm von Ockham* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1956), p. 278.

5. L.W., 36:32; cf. 36:282. It is the learned guess of Hartmut Hilgenfeld, *Mittelalterlich-traditionelle Elemente in Luthers Abendmahlsschriften* (Zuerich: Theologischer Verlag), p. 205, that having rejected transubstantiation Luther still retains the Thomistic definition of presence by way of substance. Most certainly "substance" for Luther is not a material object, as occasionally misunderstood.

6. At the same time it is equally clear that Luther has not accepted the term "consubstantiation", see Ferdinand Kattenbusch, "Luthers Idee der Konsubstantiation im Abendmahl", pp. 62-86, in *Festschrift fuer Johannes Ficker*, 1931, and Otto W. Heick, "Consubstantiation in Luther's Theology," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 7,1 (1966):3-8. That Luther endorses the idea is not questioned, e.g., Walther von Loewenich, *Vom Abendmahl Christi* (Berlin: Furche Verlag, 1938), pp. 57, 63.

7. The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VII.37 speaks of "duas diversas substantias", *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 4th ed. (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), p. 984; cf. Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), p. 102.

insofar as Luther views "substance" as a kind of verbal common denominator between transubstantiation and consubstantiation, he can forthrightly counsel:

I permit every man to hold either of these opinions, as he chooses.⁸ My one concern at present is to remove all scruples of conscience, so that no one may fear being called a heretic if he believes that real bread and real wine are present on the altar, and that every one may feel at liberty to ponder, hold, and believe either one view or the other without endangering his salvation (*L.W.*, 36:30).

While deeply committed to the doctrine of the eucharistic real presence of Christ, Luther is clearly not concerned about the philosophical niceties of the term "substance". This is not to say that Luther is not clear; He assumes the acceptance of the broad scholastic understanding of "substance". As has been pointed out by Paul Wilhelm Gennrich, "substance" according to Luther is a concrete instance of a present "essence" or "being" (*Wesen*).⁹ Thus the presence of God in the world is according to His essence as He is substantively (*substantialiter*) present in the creatures. Likewise, Luther adheres to the familiar distinction between "substance" and "accidents", by the latter meaning the various empirically observable and definable modalities according to which the concrete presence of a "substance" can be described. The entire nomenclature is, of course, Aristotelian.¹⁰

Put in another way, in the review of young Luther's understanding of the eucharistic presence of Christ, the conceptual framework is largely borrowed from the then current theological setting — and therefore is scholastic in general and Ockhamist in particular. While certainly plowing new ground¹¹ in numerous regards (and not to speak of his scathing critique of the eucharist as a sacrifice,¹² and with the withholding of the cup from the laity¹³), the manner of Christ's presence in the eucharist is at first described in a rather traditional Ockhamist fashion.

II

As Luther's thought develops further we may note that he is slowly working his way back, first to St. Augustine, then to the Early Church fathers, and all the while continuously wrestling with the Bible. This means that the sacramental theology of

8. The mature Luther could also express remarkable flexibility: "... I have often enough asserted that I do not argue whether the wine remains or not. It is enough for me that Christ's blood is present; let it be with the wine as God wills. Sooner than have mere wine with the fanatics, I would agree with the pope that there is only blood." *L.W.*, 37:317; cf. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 376-377.

9. *Die Christologie Luthers im Abendmahlsstreit 1524-1529* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1929), pp. 71-73.

10. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 7.4-6 (1029b-1032a) (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1947), 1:318-337.

11. The point is not that Luther was the first in the 16th century to do biblical theology, but rather that Luther attempted, wherever possible, to think in a biblical key even when using scholastic concepts. For a positive Catholic appreciation of Luther's theological thought-style, see Otto Hermann Pesch O.P., *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias Gruenewald Verlag, 1967), 1xxi + 1010 pp.

12. Gustaf Aulen, *Eucharist and Sacrifice* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958); Peter Meinhold & Erwin Iserloh, *Abendmahl und Opfer* (Stuttgart: Schwabenverlag, 1960); Ferdinand Pratzner, *Messe und Kreuzesopfer: Die Krise der sakramentalen Idee bei Luther und in der mittelalterlichen Scholastik* (Wien: Herder, 1970).

13. Hermann Sasse, pp. 89-99.

St. Augustine and of the Early Church fathers which Luther employs has been revised for the use in the Reformation struggles. The overarching attention to the Word is now everywhere made explicit and its priority is heavily underlined.

A good case in point is Luther's exegesis of Christ's words, "This is the cup of the New Testament."¹⁴ Here Luther offers a succinct definition of the word "testament"; it is "a short summary of all God's wonders and grace, fulfilled in Christ" (*L.W.*, 35:84). The subsequent interconnection of dazzling and overlapping meanings which Luther presents is highly complex. Luther defines the Bible as a Testament and at the same time regards it as God's holy Word, namely the message of salvation focussed in Jesus Christ.¹⁵ Luther's point in reference to the eucharist is explicit and powerful: what is here being offered is the sum total of man's salvation!

Yet, notes Luther, it is to be observed that "In all his promises, . . . in addition to his word, God has usually given a sign, for the greater assurance and strengthening of our faith" (*L.W.*, 35:86). Thus the rainbow was given to Noah as a sign "that he would not again destroy the world by a flood." Similarly, to Abraham God gave "circumcision as a mark of his justification by faith", to Gideon the fleece "to confirm his promise of victory over the Midianites" and so forth (*L.W.*, 36:43-44; 35:86; 36:65). So also now in the mass, as the foremost promise of all, Christ adds for a memorial sign his own body and blood in the bread and wine. Such is the import of Christ's words: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; I Cor. 11:24-25). Therefore, observes Luther, "We may learn from this that in every promise of God two things are presented to us, the word and the sign . . . (*L.W.*, 36:43-44). Important, and typically Augustinian, is the relative value of the two. Explains Luther:

The words are the divine vow, promise, and testament. The signs are the sacraments, that is, sacred signs. Now as the testament is much more important than the sacrament, so the words are much more important than the signs . . . And as there is greater power in the word than in the sign, so there is greater power in the testament than in the sacrament; for a man can have and use the word or testament apart from the sign or sacrament (*L.W.*, 35:91; 36:44).

It is in line with such observations that Luther can make use of the resounding quotation from St. Augustine: "Believe and you have eaten!"¹⁶ In another tract

14. Lk. 22:20; I Cor. 11:25. Hans Grass, *Die Abendmahlslehre bei Luther und Calvin* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1954), p. 90: "The Word for Luther is not merely and not even mainly a word of consecration, but it is at the same time a personal word (direkte Anrede) to the receiver of the sacrament." At the same time, of course, Luther believed in the consecration as a necessary act, see H. Grass, pp. 115-120 and Albrecht Peters, pp. 65-66.

15. Carl F. Wisloff, *The Gift of Communion: Luther's Controversy with Rome on Eucharistic Sacrifice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), pp. 34-35, outlines Luther's creative contribution over against scholastic theology and underscores: "The line of division does not run between the time of the Old Testament and that of the New, but between the relation to God secured by the promise and faith — and that which comes of Works." Cf. Kenneth Hagen, *A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther: The Lectures on Hebrews* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974); James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1969).

16. *Sermo* 112.4; *P L*, 38:645 and *L W*, 36:44. The emphasis, as noted by Grass, pp. 87, is on the effective role of the Word, since it is "the Word that brings about the real presence of the body and blood of Christ." Cf. Jürgen Diestelmann, *Konsekration: Luthers Abendmahls Glaube in*

Luther explains that "these words [of institution] are far more important than the sacrament itself, and a Christian should make it a practice to give far more attention to these words than to the sacrament" (*L.W.*, 36:77). Luther is quite aware that at this point his emphasis is onesided; it is such not by oversight but by design in order to restore a balance that Luther thought to have been lost. Namely, Luther is convinced that in the liturgical use of the late medieval church the words of institution have been intentionally denigrated:

They have depreciated these words in the eyes of the people, hidden them securely besides, and called attention only to the sacrament. The result is that faith has been lost and the sacrament has been turned into a purely external work devoid of faith (*L.W.*, 36:277).

At the same time, argues Luther in a good Augustinian manner, the Word contains the entire salvific reality ("the *res sacramenti*") which the believer can encounter in the eucharist. The Word "brings with it everything of which it speaks, namely, Christ with his flesh and blood and everything that he is and has" (*L.W.*, 36:278). Hence we should not be surprised theologically when Luther shows so little interest in the sacramental elements as to suggest that they are not essential for the dying. (*L.W.*, 36:257). Nevertheless, the sign is not to be altogether belittled, despite its subordinate status. Such a response did not satisfy the more radical reformers who wanted to know: "why does God feed us through the bread, or under the bread, when he could do so just as well by the mere Word alone, without the bread?" In reply, Luther refuses to debate the issue and appeals to the greater wisdom of God who in the Scriptures supplies us with both the Word and the institution of the eucharist. Therefore Luther counsels, "See only that you pay heed to God's Word and remain in it, like a child in the cradle. If you let go of it for a moment, then you fall out of it" (*L.W.*, 36:345).

Faithfully following his own advice, Luther clearly affirms the real presence of Christ in the eucharist. But the statements are rather brief without any in-depth interpretation. Thus, e.g., Luther speaks of the sacramental "bread and wine, under which are his true body and blood" (*L.W.*, 35:86). Or, Luther reports that Christ "takes bread and wine and with the word which he speaks he makes of them his body and blood and gives to his disciples to eat" (*L.W.*, 36:166). And although in his little, beautiful tract *The Adoration of the Sacrament*, 1520, Luther joyously proclaims that "Christ is truly present in the sacrament with his flesh and blood as it was born of Mary and hung on the holy cross . . ." (*L.W.*, 36:275) he retains the Augustinian perspective and views the Word as far outranking the sign.

dogmatisch-liturgischer Sicht (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1960); Carl F. Wisloff, pp. 141-142. It is this Augustinian emphasis which later also comes to light in *The Book of Concord*. Notes Karl Rahner, S.J., *Theological Investigations* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 4:295: " . . . according to the Lutheran confessions, an event takes place: the body of Christ which is not already present becomes present through the words of the anamnesis of the Lord's Supper. Lutherans and Catholics are at one in affirming that the coming to be of the presence is in the nature of an actual happening." If, however, faith is arbitrarily separated from the Word in general and the words of institution in particular, then the Augustinian insight can be misused to support anti-sacramental interiority.

17. Grass, pp. 21-22.

III

The third significant perspective, the central affirmation of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist, is present from the outset, yet gains remarkable intensity during Luther's struggles in the mid-twenties with the various Protestant opponents, including the Zwinglians and the Anabaptists. Since the opponents deny the real presence, Luther finds especially needful to underscore the eucharistic presence of the true body and blood of Christ. Thus in 1523 Luther warns against the views of those "who have held that in the sacrament there is merely bread and wine, such as people otherwise eat and drink." These people, whom Luther regards as heretics, "sneer at Christ's statement: 'This is my body,' and say it is equivalent to: 'This signifies my body,' and so forth" (L.W., 36:279). And in 1526 Luther notes that such men regard the sacraments as "only a sign, by which one may recognize Christians and judge them, so that we have nothing more of it than the mere shell" (L.W., 36:348). As a matter of fact, Luther is prepared to assert loudly and without any qualifications that the inventor of mere symbolism theories is the devil, enabling him to

. . . suck the egg dry and leave us the shell, that is, remove the body and blood of Christ from the bread and wine, so that it remains no more than mere bread, such as the baker bakes (L.W., 36:336).

In the defence of the eucharistic real presence of Christ Luther continues to appeal to God Himself and his Word — and points out that these are a better authority than mere secular reason. At the same time, while utilizing reason redeemed by grace,¹⁸ Luther can observe that to secular reason all divine acts look foolish. He can also point out when faith clings to the Word of God, it gains assurance even when there is no empirical evidence to support it. It is only to faith that Luther ascribes the capacity to cope with the problem of the eucharistic presence of Christ; that is to say, this faith remains obedient to the Word of God and does not attempt to explain just how it is that Christ is truly present. Luther writes, ". . . God grant that as long as I have the words, I will not seek or speculate any further; what he says, I will keep." And *what* God says, insists Luther, is perfectly clear, " 'Take, eat, this is my body,' even a child will understand perfectly well that he is speaking of that which he is offering" (L.W., 36:337).

At times, it appears, Luther is taunting¹⁹ his opponents; or at the very least Luther is carelessly overstating his case: "What if I eat Christ's flesh physically in the

18. Cf. Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1962).

19. Of course, Luther's intent was not to tease but to teach theology: the spiritualizing of the presence of Christ was therefore countered with a powerful affirmation of the incarnation, applied to the eucharistic problem as the insight that "God without flesh is useless". Cf. Grass, p. 76; Franz Hildebrandt, *Est: Das Lutherische Prinzip* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931), pp. 57-58. Yet there were times when Luther's speech was not completely edifying: "Therefore the enthusiasts as well as the Glossa of the Canonical Law are wrong if they criticize Pope Nicholas for having forced Berengar to confess that the true body of Christ is crushed with the teeth. Would to God that all popes had acted in such a Christian way in all things . . ." W A, 26:442:39 ff, quoted by Sasse, p. 162, who notes that already *The Formula of Concord*, Epitome VII.42 (*The Book of Concord*, ed., Theodore G. Tappert et al. [Philadelphia:

Supper?" (L.W., 37:85). Or, more precisely, since in the eucharist there is both bread and body, Luther speaks of eating "his body with the bread physically" (L.W., 37:85). The religious meaning which Luther seeks to attach to this act derives from his conviction that on account of faith at the eucharist there also occurs a "spiritual eating." Luther explains: "Now if the spiritual eating is there, the physical eating cannot be harmful but must also be useful on account of the spiritual eating" (L.W., 37:85). If in the Early Church the powerful assertions concerning the eating of the real body of Christ were saved from theophagy-cannibalism by a dialectic which stated that the physical act is really spiritual, in this phase in Luther's life we often discover a non-dialectical affirmation that the physical eating of Christ's body and blood has a spiritual flavor or significance (L.W., 37:85-86). Apparently Luther regards such a manner of stating his position as clear — and clearing him from the charge of being a flesh-eater. He writes, "So God arranges that the mouth eats physically for the heart and the heart eats spiritually for the mouth, and thus both are satisfied and saved by one and the same food" (L.W., 37:93).

To describe such eating further, Luther even employs a formula: "The object is not always spiritual but its use must be spiritual" (L.W., 37:89).

Luther's other attempt to clear himself of the charge of being a flesh-eater was to point out that Capernaite eating assumes that only physical eating can be beneficial. By contrast, insists Luther, we are not speaking of eating "beef or pork" (L.W., 37:100). We are not like the Capernaïtes "believing that Christ's flesh is exactly like any other flesh, utterly useless and perishable" (L.W., 37:125). Finally, Luther denies that he is a Capernaïte on the basis that "We have God's Word in the Supper" (L.W., 37:133). With the help of the already familiar Augustinian distinction between word and sign in which the word interprets and communicates the meaning of the sign, Luther now defends the bodily presence of Christ as follows: Christ is not present at the eucharist without but only with the Word. Thus "God's words, 'This is my body,' . . . grasp, comprehend, and give us physically the body of Christ; therefore the body of Christ must be useful through the Word" (L.W., 37:134).

Certainly, Luther knew that he was not a Capernaïte. In an ecumenical age we customarily take a theologian's self-understanding rather seriously. At the same time it is not necessary to assume that at this point Luther had actually explained his position to our complete satisfaction. Yet, clearly, Luther did have an explanation in mind, whether communicated to us or not, which allowed him to protest in

Fortress Press, 1959], p. 486) condemns "the Capernaïte eating of the body of Christ as though one rent Christ's flesh with teeth and digested it like other food." Sasse also records Luther's spirited illustration of his preparedness to obey God's Word: "If God told me to eat manure I would do it and be certain that it was wholesome for me," p. 237. Cf. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 389. Yet Luther's radical language has also a positive yield. Walther von Loewenich, p. 61 observes that "unlike many modern Lutherans, Luther is not satisfied with a real presence of Christ's person; the text calls for the real presence of flesh and blood" — and hence these must be affirmed. Indeed, however worth while it may be to reflect on the presence of Christ's total person, the eucharistic presence in its very concreteness offers to us the actual, incarnate Lord and not just an abstraction.

authentic outrage:

We poor sinners, indeed, are not so foolish as to believe that Christ's body is in the bread in a crude visible manner, like bread in a basket or wine in a cup, a belief with which the fanatics would like to saddle us, to amuse themselves with our folly (*L.W.*, 37:65).

There are, Luther now suggests in a renewed effort at clarifying the manner of Christ's presence, several ways by which "one object" can be "in another than this crude mode which they set forth, as wine is in a cask, bread in a box, or money in a pocket." When Luther comes to supply some additional examples, he turns to the Scriptures as well as to common experience: children are "in their fathers' loins"; what people see can be said to "be in their eyes"; whatever reflects in a mirror is in it. Also, "trees and all fruits are in the kernel or seed" (*L.W.*, 37:65). Finally, meditates Luther:

. . . all things are in our hearts, even God himself, and this indeed is a greater wonder than all others. Who will doubt, then, that God has many more modes which he does not tell us about, where one thing is in another, or two things are present at the same time in one place? (*L.W.*, 37:65-66).

It is this last mode of divine omnipresence, reaching to all places and into all objects, that allows Luther to explain more precisely the manner of Christ's eucharistic presence.²⁰ Christ too, due to his status as a God-man, is everywhere, although "he does not permit himself to be so caught and grasped," — just as there is a profound difference between God being generally present and being existentially "present for you." The eucharistic words then serve to pinpoint and to assure to the believers the real presence of Christ:

He is there for you when he adds his Word and binds himself, saying, "Here you are to find me." Now when you have the Word, you can grasp and have him with certainty and say, "Here I have thee, according to thy Word" (*L.W.*, 37:68).

It is, explains Luther, as if Christ were saying to us:

Because I wish to attach myself here with my Word, in order that you may not have to buzz about, trying to seek me in all places where I am; this would be too much for you, and you would also be too puny to apprehend me in these places without the help of my Word (*L.W.*, 37:69).

At the same time, although Luther has asserted that Christ, like God, is eucharistically present when his ubiquity is perceived on account of the assurance of the Word — he has not specifically explained the exact mode of Christ's real presence.

20. Hilgenfeld, p. 215, has pointed out that in this perspective Luther sees Christ's eucharistic presence as a particular exemplification of Christ's ubiquity. The insight is Ockhamist, but its presentation has taken place without the philosophical precision of that tradition. It should be noted, however, that this is a significant aspect, yet not the complete story of Luther's position — otherwise institution would amount to merely an announcement and certification that a universal presence is available here at the eucharist in a concrete way. Actually, in Luther's view, the words of institution not only announce but also effect the eucharistic presence. Karl Rahner, S.J., 4:295 is correct: "Luther's effort to bring in the doctrine of the divine ubiquity to explain the real presence of the body of Christ is a theological after-thought, which should not be used as the invariable starting-point to explain and restrict the view which Luther wished to have maintained with regard to the sacrament, because the explanation should be brought into line with what is to be explained, and not vice versa."

In fact, Luther presently counsels against the possibility of such an explanation: "But how this takes place or how he is in the bread, we do not know, and are not meant to know" (*L.W.*, 37:29). In another passage Luther makes the same point by way of a question:

Should not this same God also know some way whereby his body could be wholly and completely present in many places at the same time, and yet none of these places could be where he is? (*L.W.*, 37:60).

While this is a clear and forthright admission of his inability to explain the exact mode of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, the above insight has a definite positive value as well. Namely, here Luther offers to the reader an authentic challenge to accept Christ's Word without debate and speculation, to trust although there is no immediate evidence, to rely and to follow simply because it is a command from God. The manner of Christ's eucharistic presence remains a mystery, but in the midst of this discussion Luther succeeds in drawing a remarkable profile of the believer as a person of ultimate courage, ready to risk everything in obedience to God. Thus to Luther Christ's words "This is my body" were a great and marvellous occasion to grow in faith as one was nurtured by the holy encounter with Christ.

IV

Luther's lengthy *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, 1528, continues to warn against speculation, i.e., theologizing that does not wrestle with the Word of God, but seeks the final answers in agreement with secular reason and human learning. Luther writes: ". . . we warn people not to ask how it comes to pass that Christ's body is present in the Supper, but simply to believe the words of God." Luther specifically notes that this advice is not offered for the "common people" but for the theologians. Then he adds a comment, apparently intended in self-defense: "with all their speculation they are becoming open liars and attacking ideas that they have dreamed up, but no one teaches" (*L.W.*, 37:194). In other words, Luther continues to feel that he has been very unfairly accused of being a "flesh-eater". His great *Confession* of 1528 now attempts to clarify once for all that he has never taught a cannibalistic eating of the body of Christ.

In plain language, we do not say that Christ's body is present in the Supper in the same form in which he was given for us — who would say that? — but that it is the same body which was given for us, not in the same form or mode but in the same essence and nature (*L.W.*, 37:195).

Luther knows very well that the opponents seek to "prove that Christ is not present in the Supper in a visible, mortal, and earthly mode." At the same time, Luther is convinced that they prove only what is already obvious to everyone: — "a thing which is not in the least necessary to prove, for we acknowledge it all" (*L.W.*, 37:197). This is not a confession which Luther spills out, as it were, under duress. Years later, in 1544, he offers an identical observation:

They called us cannibals, blood-drinkers, man-eaters, Capernaïtes, Thyesteans, etc. . . . [Yet] they knew very well that we had never taught or believed this . . . that Christ was locally [*localiter*] in the sacrament and was eaten up piecemeal as

a wolf devours a sheep, and that we were drinking blood as a cow drinks water (L.W., 38:291-292).

Since in the past Luther had indeed stated repeatedly that the exact manner of Christ's eucharistic presence cannot be explained, Luther has now scored a point: he should not have been accused of cannibalism even when he was insisting on the "physical" eating of Christ. After all, a physical eating which cannot be explained and is mysterious in its essence is not mere physical eating!

Obviously aware that he must clarify his position, Luther returns to the late medieval setting where in the Ockhamist²¹ perspective he had started on his theological journey. The spiral (rather than a circle, for Luther has made authentic progress as well!) is therefore complete. Writes Luther, "There are three modes of being present in a given place: locally or circumscriptively, definitively, repletively."

The *first*, circumscriptive or local presence, describes an object in a space where both "fit into the same measurements, such as wine or water in a cask, where the wine occupies no more space and the cask yields no more space than the volume of the wine."

The *second*, definitive presence, describes an object which is uncircumscribed and "can occupy either more room or less." Such is the presence of angels and spirits. A case in point is Mt. 8:28 ff. where an entire legion of devils enter into one man. "That would be about six thousand devils," notes Luther (L.W. 37:215). But definitive presence should not be associated exclusively with evil spirits:

"This was the mode in which the body of Christ was present when he came out of the closed grave, and came to the disciples through a closed door . . ." Of these two modes of presence Christ has experienced both — local presence before his resurrection and definitive presence after the resurrection. It is according to the definitive presence, thinks Luther, that Christ "can be and is in the bread" (L.W., 37:216).

Finally, there is also repletive presence, which is a supernatural mode and can be predicated to God alone who "is simultaneously present in all places whole and entire, and fills all places, yet without being measured or circumscribed by any place . . ." "This mode," insists Luther, "is altogether incomprehensible, beyond our reason, and can be maintained only with faith, in the Word" (L.W., 37:216). Apparently it is such a faith which, following the Scriptures, has taught Luther that the repletive presence is also applicable to Christ:

. . . since he is a man who is supernaturally one person with God, and apart from this man there is no God, it must follow that according to the third supernatural mode, he is and can be wherever God is and that everything is full of Christ through and through, even according to his humanity — not according to the first, corporeal, circumscribed mode, but according to the supernatural, divine mode (L.W., 37:218).

Since "faith alone" grasps the meaning of repletive presence, secular reason has to "vanish". Moreover, adds Luther, "God may have and know still other modes whereby Christ's body can be in a given place" (L.W., 37:223). Nevertheless, the

21. Hilgenfeld, pp. 217-219, has noted that Luther's definition appears to be broadly based on the Ockhamist Gabriel Biel, *Collectorium*, I, d, 37, q, un. Sasse, pp. 156-158 compares Luther's position to that of Ockham.

"faith alone" which Luther employs at this level of the discussion is a faith with a thoughtful content, ordinarily labeled as reason redeemed by grace. What is the range for this reason, redeemed by grace, according to Luther? We may begin with the sage observation by Robert H. Fischer: "Luther never elevated his view of the modes of presence to the status of necessary doctrine . . . Luther's theory about modes of presence is simply a philosophical opinion."²² I observe that Luther's willingness to make use of a "philosophical opinion" in the most crucial place of this entire discussion has the following significance: it permits to comprehend that revelation, even though too lofty to be grasped fully even by the believer, is not intrinsically absurd but cogent. Luther is quite explicit that thinking is not optional but necessary: " . . . we must use our reason or else give way to the fanatics" (*L.W.*, 37:224). An analogous discovery was made centuries earlier at the council of Nicea, where heretical misinterpretation of Christological formulae in a subordinationist sense could be prevented only by the use of a philosophical term of limit (*homoeousios*), indicating in what way the scriptural quotations were to be understood. Similarly, the definitions of presence which Luther has borrowed from the Ockhamist tradition do not of themselves explain the presence of Christ, but exclude such unworthy notions as cannibalism and mere memorial feast, and underscore the truly miraculous character of this presence. Put in another way, such philosophical models as "substance" or "repletive presence" are not autonomous attempts of secular reason to provide an explanation pleasing to itself, but faithful and thoughtful confessions as to how the words of Christ, "This is my body" may be meaningfully understood.²³ In this understanding religious thinking and the faithful encounter with a miracle are merged.

The illustrations which Luther provides for the Ockhamist definition of presence are then appropriately such that require both some initial understanding and the observer's active participation. A good example is the beautiful story about a gem:

I have seen crystals or jewels within which was a kind of spark or flame, as in an opal, or a little cloud or bubble; and yet this little bubble or cloud shines as if it were at every side of the stone, for whichever way the stone is turned, the bubble can be seen as if it were at the very front of the stone, though it is really in the centre of it . . . Do you not suppose that God in a much truer and more miraculous way can set forth Christ's body in the bread, even if he were at a certain place in heaven, than show me the spark in a crystal? (*L.W.*, 37:224).

The illustration which Luther borrows from the Renaissance humanist Lorenzo Valla is likewise an example of understanding and experience — the voice of a single preacher being in one instant heard by thousands of people! Luther admonishes, "My friend, if God can do this with a physical voice, why should he not be able to

22. "Luther's Stake in the Lord's Supper Controversy", *Dialog* 2,1 (1963):53.

23. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings, Companion Volume, Luther's Works*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959, p. 141, has made the valuable observation that Luther did not subordinate Scriptures to any theological principles. Rather, Luther's " . . . exegesis sought to derive the teachings of the Scriptures from the particular statements of the Scriptures rather than from the *a priori* principles of a theological system." My own point, in addition, is that Luther has employed theological principles in a delimiting role, to pinpoint in what precise sense the scriptural insight is to be correctly understood.

do it far more easily with the body of Christ? . . ." (L.W., 37:225). Understanding and experience are also the point of the illustration which Luther remembered from his days as a Roman Catholic, " . . . if a mirror were broken into a thousand pieces, nevertheless the same complete image which had appeared previously in the whole mirror would remain in each piece" (L.W., 37:225).

Indeed, why could not God do something like this to the body of Christ?! Certainly the great gift of the real presence of Christ can be adored in several ways, and Luther offers one more thoughtful attempt by way of various prepositions:

Of course, our [secular] reason takes a foolish attitude, since it is accustomed to understanding the word "in" only in a physical, circumscribed sense like straw in a sack and bread in a basket. Consequently, when it hears that God is in this or that object, it always thinks of the straw-sack and the breadbasket. But faith understands that in these matters "in" is equivalent to "above," "beyond," "beneath," "through and through," and "everywhere."²⁴

If at one time the acceptance of a physical presence in a literal sense was a great achievement of faith over against the objections of secular reasoning, now secular reason is censured by the mature Luther for proposing a eucharistic presence in a literal sense, and grace-redeemed-reason is employed to write good exegetical theology. Thus, in terms of explicit formulation, Luther's position had experienced a considerable growth. (That careful re-reading of the scholastic sources helped in this growth is a fact.)²⁵ Yet several main concerns remained constant and assisted Luther in his growth.

First, Luther's firm opposition to trivial and even serious philosophical curiosity in religious matters has always remained firm. At best Luther was a man of faith who challenged others to faith. Of course, he had to organize his insights of faith, and here at times the use of philosophical concepts was inevitable. Perhaps it is ungrateful to wish that a great biblical theologian could have been more conversant with philosophical theology. Had that been the case, philosophy would not have been employed as the very last resort — and Luther would have been less often misunderstood.²⁶

Second, Luther did not confuse a living faith as a response to the Word of God with rigid belief that accepts dogmas as xerox copies of reality. Constant in his fidelity to the Word, Luther took in account the situation within which he lived and wrote, learned from his own insights and errors, and progressed in his thought. It is only from the full range of the upward spiral²⁷ of Luther's theology that the truth of

24. L.W., 37: 230; cf. *The Large Catechism in The Book of Concord*, p. 447 and Hans Grass, pp. 127-128.

25. Hilgenfeld, p. 225 has made a good case that before the writing of the important *Confession of 1528*, Luther had re-acquainted himself with the Ockhamist tradition.

26. That is stated far more diplomatically but persuasively by Pesch, pp. 942-948.

27. Peters, p. 35 is of course correct that Luther sought to break through the aristotelian-scholastic categories and to write a biblical theology. At the same time it must be repeated that Luther was not a thoughtless radical; he retained scholastic patterns of thought wherever he found them to be useful vehicles to transmit scriptural insights. Sasse, p. 78, has put the matter insightfully: " . . . no one can study these controversies [of the sixteenth century] without realizing that to a large degree they are a continuation, if not consummation, of medieval debates and strifes." That such a continuation would be possible without a conceptual dependence at least to a degree is unlikely.

his position may be grasped.

Thirdly, the memorable words of Hermann Sasse ought not to be ever forgotten: "No one can understand Luther unless he has understood his fight for the real presence."²⁸ In this fight Luther displayed a reverent and creative passion to celebrate the truth of the Word of God and to adore the miracle of Christ's real presence in the eucharist. Luther's example remains as a powerful witness of faithfulness.

Lastly, Luther's definition of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist is by his own confession biblical and at the same time also catholic.²⁹ Although defending neither transubstantiation nor consubstantiation, Luther's adherence to such central scholastic definitions as "substance" and "presence" places him in a broad stream of mainline interpreters whose central concern has been the truth of Christ's eucharistic presence. While not easy to understand at every step of his theological journey, Luther is both comprehensible and persuasive. He also leaves no misunderstanding that in the last analysis the eucharistic presence of Christ is a miracle. Hence proper theologizing about it is an exercise of faith seeking and receiving salvation.

28. Cf. Sasse, p. 11: "No one can understand Luther unless he has understood his fight for the Real Presence."

29. Hence Lutherans should not be surprized to read the judicious verdict of the eminent Karl Rahner, S.J. : " . . . it seems to me that with regard to the real presence in the sacrament itself, otherwise than with regard to transubstantiation, there is no essential difference between the Catholic and the Lutheran faith." *Theological Investigations*, 1974, 6:294.

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